

# Using an internship opportunity to expand awareness of industrial/organizational psychology

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## Abstract

*The public perception of the field of psychology tends to be limited to the clinical area. Exposure to other areas of psychology through broad, introductory courses helps expand students' perspectives of psychology. This exposure may be too late, however, as many colleges cannot afford to devote entire courses to each of the many subfields of psychology, including industrial/organizational psychology. This article describes the use of an internship experience as a means of expanding a high school student's understanding of the field of psychology. Benefits are described for psychology, the employing department, and the intern. Suggestions are also provided for faculty interested in implementing similar internship experiences.*

## Keywords:

internships, high school, industrial/organizational psychology

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## **Using an Internship Opportunity to Expand Awareness of Industrial/Organizational Psychology**

A recent interview with the Society for Industrial Organizational Psychology (SIOP) presidents (Costanza & Kisamore, 2007) and the ongoing discussion about the identity of industrial/organizational (I/O) psychology (Highhouse, 2007) highlight the problem that the public does not understand what I/O psychologists do. Issues include the perception of psychology as predominantly clinical in nature and a general lack of information among professionals regarding what I/O psychology has to offer. Recently, faculty members in the Organizational Dynamics program at the University of Oklahoma-Tulsa (OU-Tulsa) had the unique opportunity to give a high school student an alternative look at psychology through a summer internship experience.

### ***Internships***

Internship experiences, as a type of career academy experience, are distinct from traditional vocational opportunities that prepare students for jobs upon completion of high school (Winthrop, 2001). According to Winthrop (2001) experiences such as internships allow students to look into “career fields, entire industries, and to provide broadly defined workplace skills relevant across many jobs” (p. 1). Indeed, internship experiences have many benefits. According to Winthrop, among other benefits internships allow students to gain experiences that confirm what they are learning in high school, learn what it feels like to have a real occupation, and increase their understanding of factors that are important in choosing a future career.

Research has examined internship opportunities focusing on the outcomes interns garner from these experiences. For example, Glading (2007) performed a qualitative study of 9 adults, who had either graduated from or were currently attending college and who had participated in an internship program while in high school. Glading asked the participants to reflect on their

internship experience and comment on how it affected their future decisions. All 9 students indicated that their high school internship experience contributed in a positive manner to their college and post-college careers and also influenced their view of ethics in the workplace, ability to get along with others, and capacity for making good decisions regarding their careers. Glading (2007, p. 162) reported that

The incorporation of meaningful internship experiences in both the secondary and postsecondary educational settings may contribute to a seamless transition to life after high school...One of the major findings of this study is that the high school internship experience fostered personal growth in these nine students.

While research supports the use of internship experiences, the availability of such opportunities for interested students is often limited. This may be exacerbated for high school students because high school leaders are often less motivated to develop partnerships which encourage students to become involved with the local community through activities such as internships and job shadowing than they are in improving students' standardized test scores (Glading, 2007; Sanders & Lewis, 2005).

Availability of internships can be an issue, even for college students. After finishing her third year of college, Lisa Pollack applied to 100 newspapers for a summer internship position; all of the newspapers that she applied to rejected her (Mackay, 1997). Despite these rejections, Pollack persevered, and eventually found another opportunity through a freelance job with the *Ann Arbor News*. Pollack is now a Pulitzer Prize winning reporter who worked for the *Baltimore Sun* (Mackay, 1997) for seven years and whose career has since branched out to include other forms of media (This American Life, n.d.). Pollack persevered regardless of her obstacles, but others might not have this type of determination and may give up on a career goal due to limited opportunities early on in their education.

In spite of limited internship opportunities, high school students increasingly want to partake in internships to gain applied experience which they can reflect on their resumes (Sanders & Lewis, 2005; Stock, 2004). Not all students are plagued by limited opportunities, however; some high schools have already partnered with local communities seeing the potential for benefits to students and the community at large. For example, Conestoga high school in Berwyn, PA. has an active community partnership program; in one year, 398 out of the 420 eligible seniors took part in its internship program (Stock, 2004). Through the internship program, not only do students learn more about a particular career field but students also develop general career skills including becoming proficient networkers and good interviewees.

Why do some high schools leaders use internship programs extensively when the vast majority do not? To answer this question, Sanders and Lewis (2005) conducted a study of three high schools to investigate the high school leaders' motivations for implementing a partnership with the community. The three high schools were chosen to represent different types of communities with one in a city, another in a suburb, and the third in a rural area. Each of these schools was already participating in a community involvement program for their students. Results of Sanders and Lewis's (2005, p. 6) study showed that the reason the leaders of these high schools chose to encourage community involvement of students through the partnership programs including internships and other activities was because it improved the "academic and personal success" of the students while it also helped the overall "quality" of the high school and provided support to the community.

Whether there are few or many internship positions available in a given location, the rewards of internship programs outweigh effort involved in developing them. These benefits are especially salient in light of the current talent shortage, a shortage that is only projected to

worsen (Dennis, 2003; Mirvis et al., 2008; Ouellette, 1998). Thus, it is essential that business and educational organizations partner to provide greater opportunities for students' career growth and development.

### **An Internship Experience at OU-Tulsa**

The Organizational Dynamics program at the University of Oklahoma (OU) in Tulsa is a nontraditional, terminal Master's program. It is the only program offered in Tulsa by OU's Department of Psychology. In the spring of 2007, the Dean of the Graduate College asked the two resident faculty members if they would be willing to offer a summer internship for a high school student interested in learning more about psychology. They were. The professors coordinated with each other regarding the intern's schedule but created objectives separately so as to give the intern a more diverse experience. The experience became one of learning not only for the intern but also for the faculty members involved.

#### ***Benefits to the Program and Field***

Having a high school intern was beneficial to the Organizational Dynamics faculty and the field of psychology, especially I/O psychology. Because the Organizational Dynamics program is targeted toward full-time working adult professionals, few students in the program are willing to quit their high paying jobs to take positions with the faculty as research assistants. The faculty members often have difficulty finding and keeping good research assistants, especially during the summer months. Thus, the high school intern provided much needed assistance to faculty over the summer.

Having a high school intern also benefited the field of psychology. Most colleges and universities are limited in the curriculum they can offer; they often cannot offer a plethora of specialty undergraduate level courses in psychology so as to cover all areas within the discipline.

Entire courses are less likely to be devoted to some areas of psychology such as I/O psychology (Perlman & McCann, 1999). Although students may get some exposure to I/O psychology in courses such as Introductory Psychology, coverage is often limited or non-existent (Griggs, Jackson, Christopher, & Marek, 1999; Payne & Pariyothorn, 2007; Raley, Lucas, & Blazek, 2003). Research, however, suggests exposing students to material relevant to I/O psychology can increase the likelihood that they will later enroll in I/O courses (Maynard, Bachiochi, & Luna, 2002). Therefore, exposing students to I/O psychology during high school may be one way to broaden students' understanding of the field of psychology. Early exposure may also help students interested in pursuing psychology as a major to make more informed choices about colleges if they plan to include I/O curriculum in their studies.

### ***Benefits to the Intern***

The intern responded positively to the internship experience. At the end of the internship, the intern was asked to write a reflection paper on the internship experience, including not only a description of the tasks she performed, but also how each task contributed to or revised her understanding of the field of psychology. The intern stated that she enjoyed the experience and developed a better understanding of the field of psychology and the Organizational Dynamics program in particular. She noted that before the internship, her image of a psychologist was limited to that of a clinical psychologist and that she was unaware there are so many other aspects of psychology. In her essay, she described the types of tasks she completed, what she learned, and the competencies she developed from the experience. These benefits included gaining a better understanding of the research consent process including legal issues and maintaining research documentation, learning how to manage and analyze data, understanding how to describe survey-based research results, preparing materials for the presentation of

empirical research, and becoming familiar with principles and applications of psychological testing including vocational counseling. The intern indicated that the experience taught her a great deal about the field, and it also taught her much about herself.

### ***Supervising a High School Intern***

There are several issues that faculty members interested in taking on a high school intern should consider. First, the internship is primarily a learning experience for the high school student, whether or not he/she is paid for the experience. Thus, the intern should be assigned significant tasks that will help the intern learn more about the field. Specifically, as part of the Millennial generation, the intern will likely want to understand the meaningfulness of assigned tasks (Alsop, 2006), including how tasks fit into the broader area of I/O psychology, faculty job responsibilities, or the intern's career development. Second, although the intern may free up some faculty time by tackling some of the more routine tasks, the intern is likely to need quite a bit of guidance on assignments to be successful and to keep on task. Although the high school intern may be self-motivated enough to seek out and obtain an internship position, he/she may not be self-reliant (Borges, Manuel, Elam, & Jones, 2006) in terms of finding workable solutions to complications on assigned tasks (Alsop, 2006). Third, this lowered self-reliance coupled with the likelihood the intern has grown up in a networked culture (Oblinger, 2003) requires that the faculty member who is supervising the intern be readily accessible during the intern's working hours whether in person, by e-mail, or phone. Fourth, the faculty supervisor needs to have a ready list of tasks for the intern who may be uncomfortable about asking for additional tasks once an assignment is complete. Fifth, having experience with multiple faculty members provides the richest experience for the intern; however, the intern should have a clearly identified contact person for the duration of the internship. This contact person should be responsible for

advising the intern and coordinating his/her schedule across the various faculty members. This schedule can alleviate problems that may occur when faculty must be away from the office for conferences, seminars, or data collection.

### **Conclusion**

Life is an ongoing educational experience. Too often the label *education* is reserved for those formal activities that happen in the classroom, but education and training in psychology can take on many different forms. This form of education became clear in the unique opportunity of having a high school student serve as an intern for the Organizational Dynamics faculty at OU-Tulsa. Such opportunities are not limited to internships; however, they can also include high school career day talks, mentoring, and job shadowing.

As faculty, we often discuss ways to increase undergraduates' understanding and exposure to the field of psychology. Exposure to popular media, however, often skews the perception of psychology to a few domains. Perhaps psychologists in less publicized fields can and need to go a step further, by making high school students and teachers (Stuhlmacher & Halpert, 2004) aware that psychology encompasses more than just traditional clinical or experimental areas, and these less publicized fields are applicable to and can enhance all areas of life.

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